

**Excerpt from *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* by Neil White
Pages 205-206**

CHAPTER 51

"Ella," I asked, "do you have any children?"

"They wouldn't let me have none," she said.

"Did you want kids?"

"Wanted lots of 'em," she said, her voice trailing off. She looked down at the floor.

"But they wouldn't let me have none."

Ella's smile disappeared, and I wished I could take back my question. I didn't know what to say. We fell silent.

Then Jimmy Harris called out, "Hey, young fella!" Jimmy had severe curvature of the spine, and he wore bright red suspenders that accentuated his stooped posture. He waved me over to his table.

"I'm Catholic, you know," Jimmy said. "My wife and I used the rhythm method, and it isn't very reliable." Jimmy and his wife became pregnant with a son. But rather than have the Sisters of Charity take his boy and place him in an anonymous home, Jimmy arranged for his son to live with a woman in Ville Platte, Louisiana. Two years later, when they gave birth to a girl, the same woman took the child.

"My children were raised by a wonderful woman," Jimmy added. "A saint."

"Did you get to see them?" I asked.

"See 'em all the time," he said, smiling. "They're coming with the grandchildren to pick me up this weekend."

While Jimmy talked about his children, Ella left the cafeteria. I watched as she rolled out toward the corridor. It was the only time I had ever seen her look sad.

Jimmy looked over his shoulder and whispered, "Not many people will tell you this, but in the old days they encouraged us to get an operation." "What kind?"

"Sterilization," Jimmy said in a low voice. "They didn't force it on us, but they dangled privileges out there to encourage volunteers."

I couldn't believe Ella would knowingly volunteer for an operation that would keep her from being a mother. I knew about sterilization of mental patients in the United States, and one of the reference books I'd read mentioned that leprosy patients had been sterilized in Japan. "Did many get the operation?" I asked.

"I don't know about nobody but me," he said.

I would never know if Ella had been sterilized. I didn't want to make her sad, so I never brought up the subject again. But I felt terrible for her. She had helped me so much since I'd come to Carville. At a time when I was planning a future with my children, Ella was living out her last years. There were no children to carry on her spirit or legacy or stories. When she died, there would be no others. For Ella, it stopped here.